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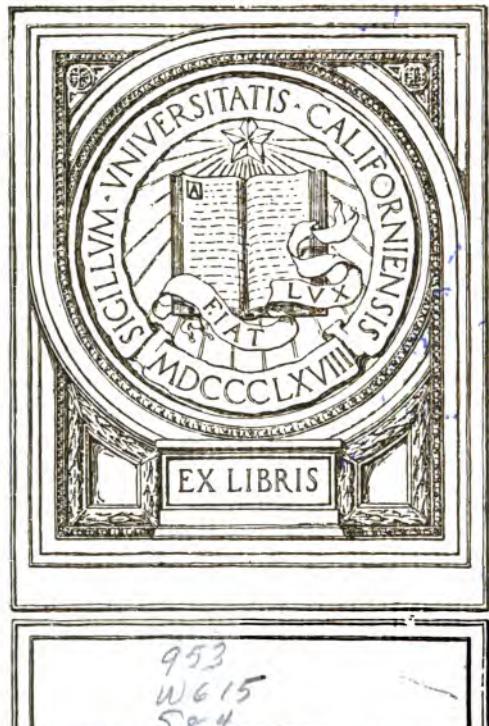
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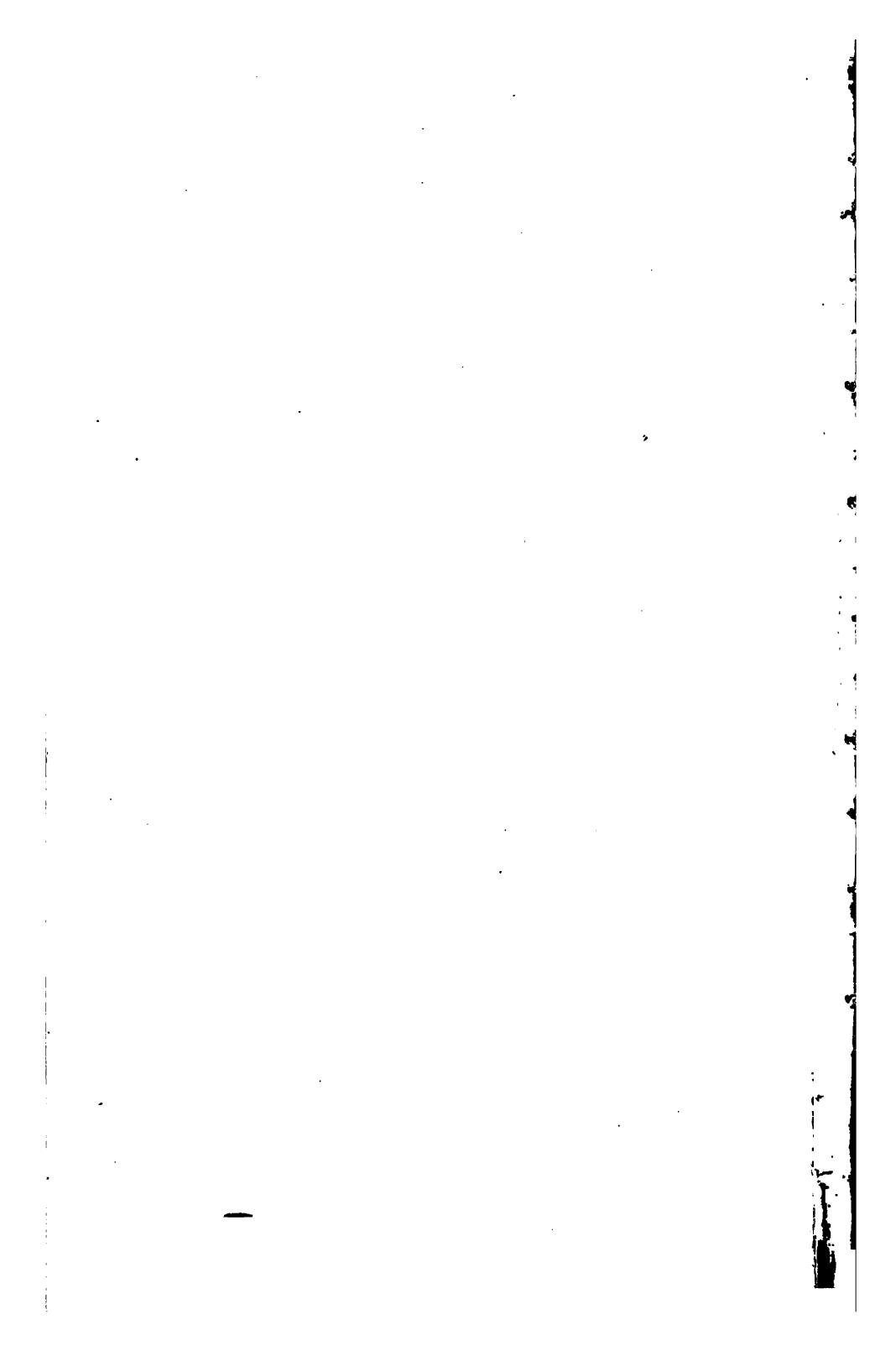
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Jan 04 1954



THE
ESSAY
ON
**WALT
WHITMAN**

BY
ROBERT
LOUIS
STEVENSON

—
WITH A LITTLE
JOURNEY TO THE
HOME OF
WHITMAN

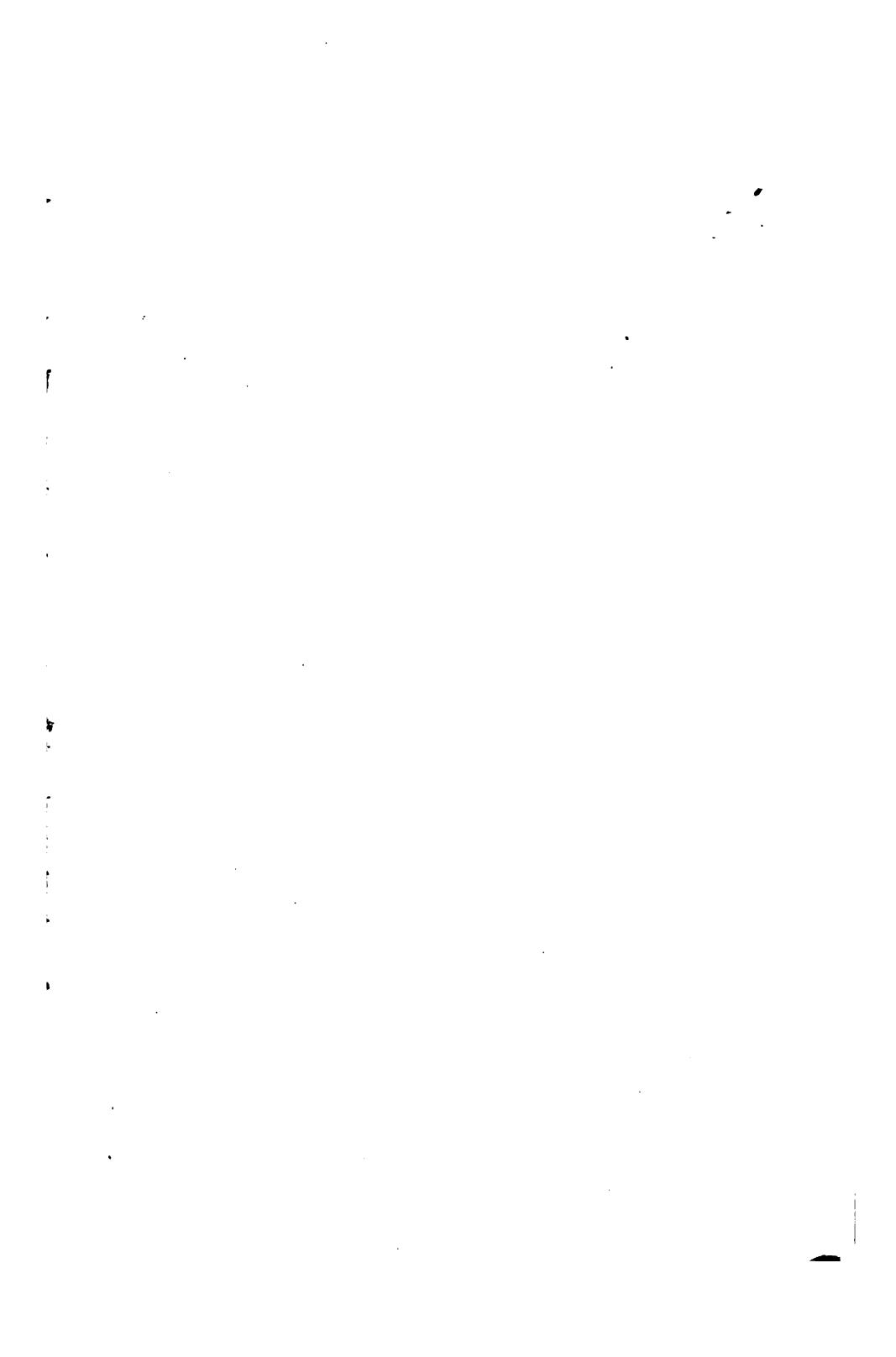
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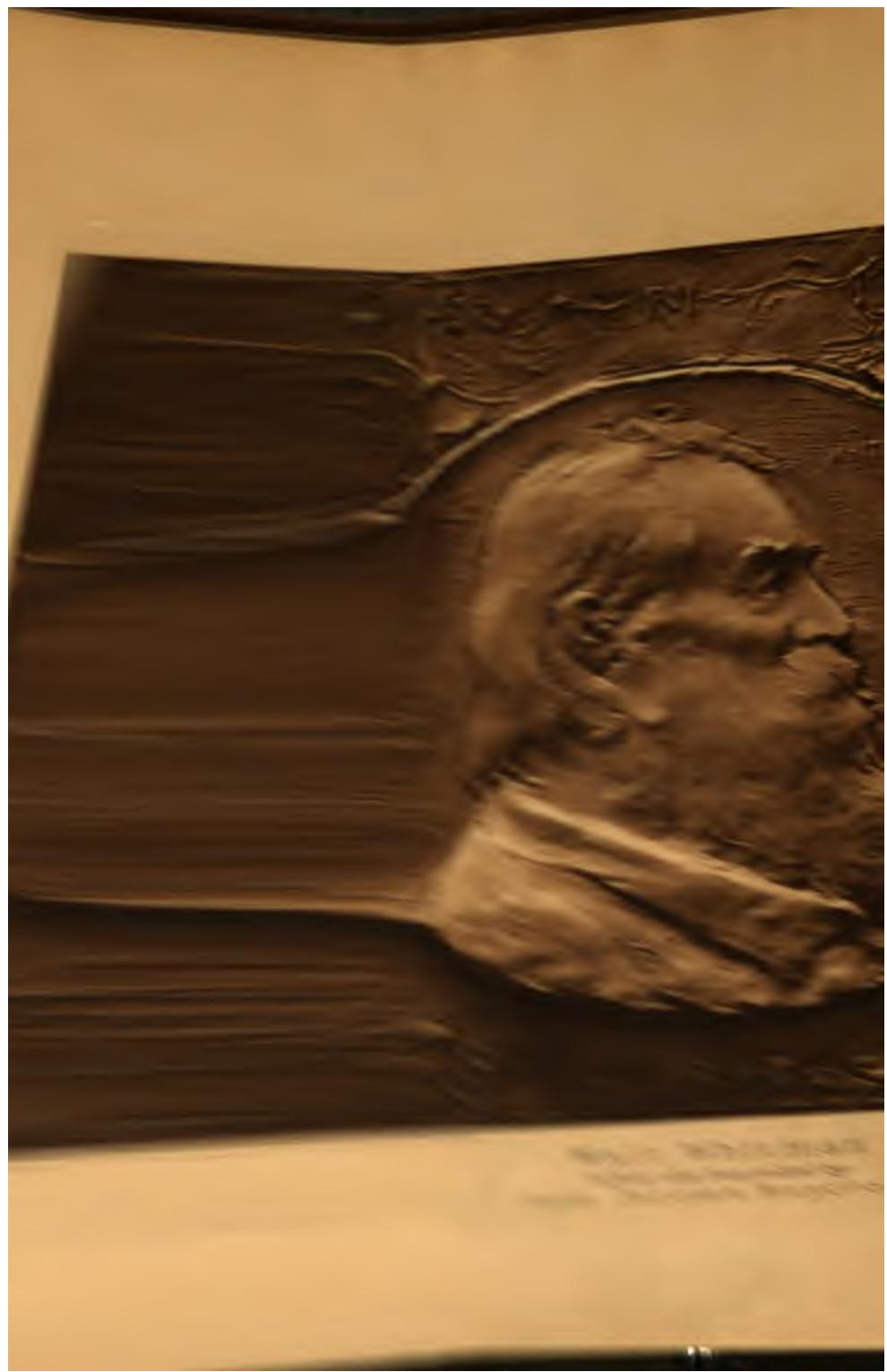
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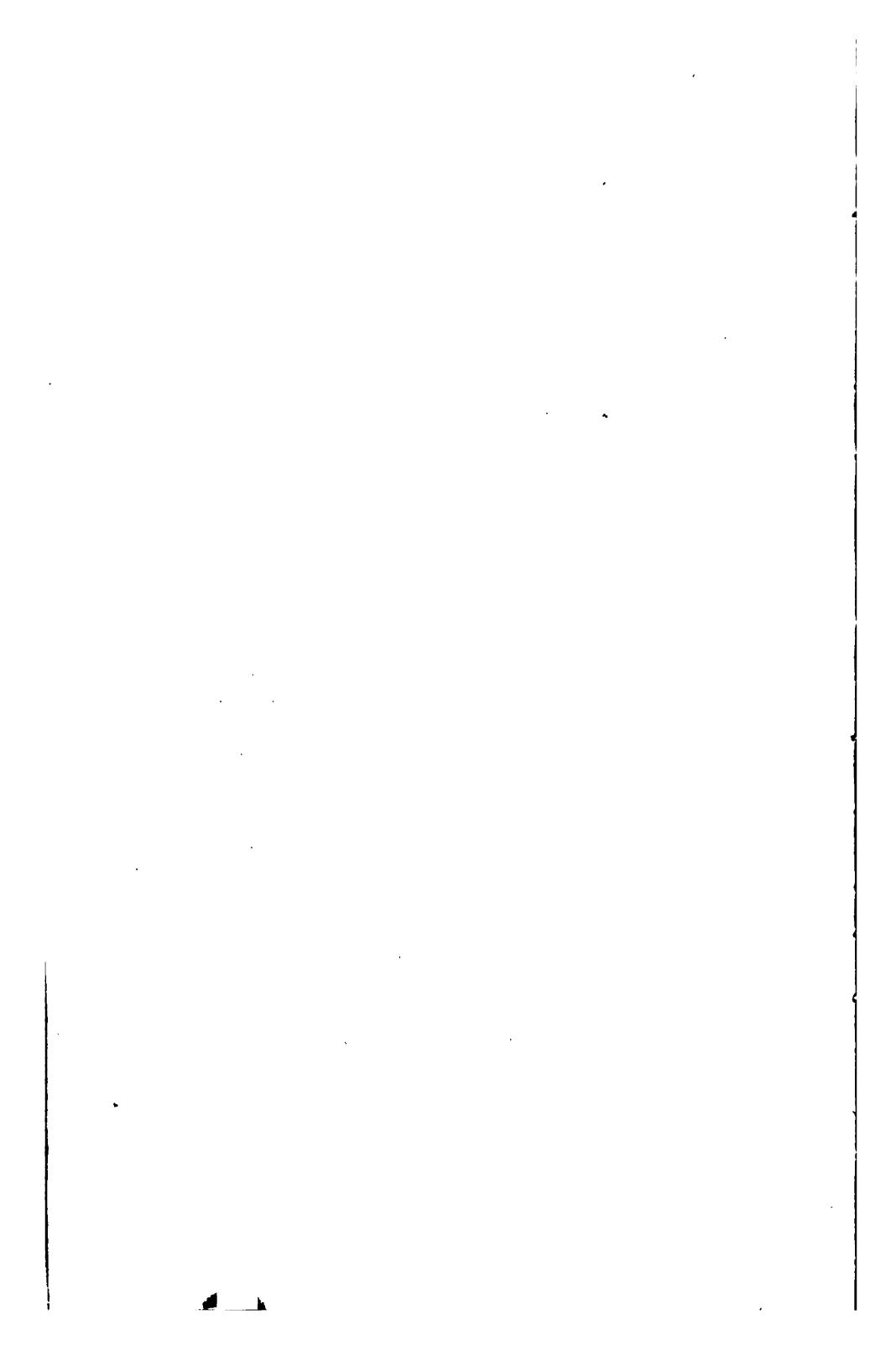
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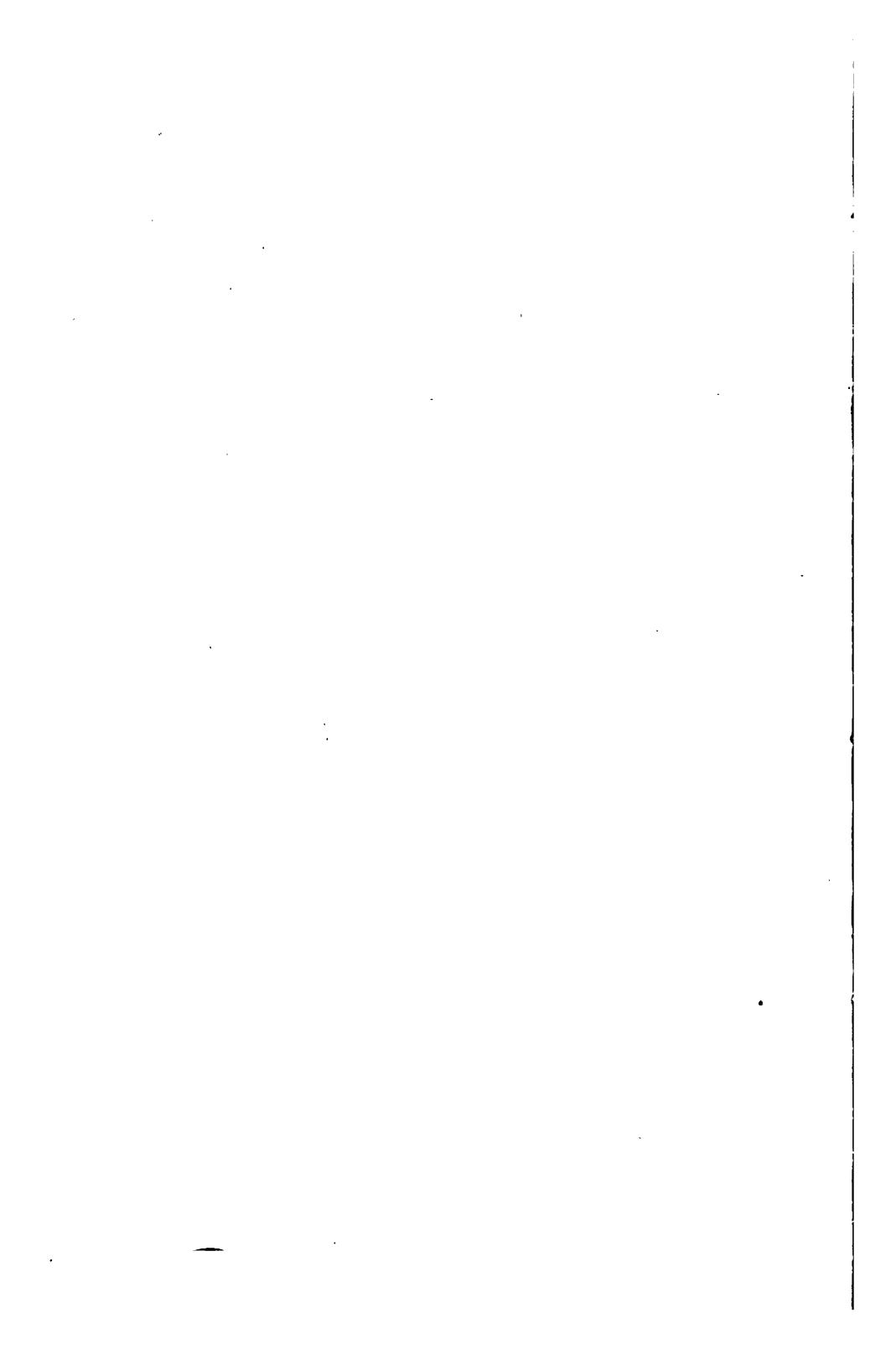


All seems beautiful to me.
I can repeat over to men and women, You
have done such good to me I would do
the same to you,
I will recruit for myself and you as I go.
I will scatter myself among men and women
as I go,
I will toss a new gladness and roughness.
among them.

—Song of the Open Road.



A LITTLE JOURNEY
TO THE HOME OF WHITMAN



MAX NORDAU wrote a book—WALT
wrote it with his tongue in his WHITMAN
cheek, a dash of vitriol in the
ink, & with a pen that scratched.

¶ And the first critic who seemed to place a just estimate on the work was Mr. Zangwill (who has no Christian name). Mr. Zangwill made an attempt to swear out a "writ de lunatico inquirendo" against his Jewish brother, on the ground that the first symptom of insanity is often the delusion that others are insane ; and this being so, Dr. Nordau was not a safe subject to be at large. But the Assize of Public Opinion denied the petition and the dear people bought the book at from three to five dollars per copy. Printed in several languages, its sales have mounted to a hundred thousand volumes, and the author's net profit is full forty thousand dollars. No wonder it is that, with pockets full to bursting, Dr. Nordau goes out behind the house and laughs uproariously whenever he thinks of how he has worked the world ! If Dr. Talmage is the Barnum of Theology, surely we may call Dr. Nordau the Barnum of Science. His agility in manipulating facts

WALT is equal to Hermann's now-you-see-it and now-WHITMAN you-don't with pocket handkerchiefs. Yet Hermann's exhibition is worth the admittance fee, and Nordau's book (seemingly written in collaboration with Jules Verne and Mark Twain) would be cheap for a dollar. But what I object to is Prof. Hermann's disciples posing as Sure-Enough Materializing Mediums and Prof. Lombroso's followers calling themselves Scientists, when each goes forth without scrip or purse with no other purpose than to supply themselves with both.

Yet it was Barnum himself who said that the public delights in being humbugged, and strange it is that we will not allow ourselves to be thimble-rigged without paying for the privilege.

Nordau's success hinged on his audacious assumption that the public knows nothing of the Law of Antithesis. Yet Plato explained that the opposite of things look alike, and sometimes are alike, and that was quite awhile ago.

The multitude answered: "Thou hast a devil"; Many of them said: "He hath a devil and is mad"; Festus said with a loud

voice : " Paul, thou art beside thyself." And WALT Nordau shouts in a voice more heady than WHITMAN that of Pilate, more throaty than that of Festus—" Mad—Whitman was—mad beyond the cavil of a doubt ! "

In 1862, Lincoln, looking out of a window (before lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed) on one of the streets of Washington, saw a workingman in shirt sleeves go by. Turning to a friend, the President said : " There goes a man ! " The exclamation sounds singularly like that of Napoleon on meeting Goethe. But the Corsican's remark was intended for the poet's ear, while Lincoln did not know who his man was, although he came to know him afterward.

Lincoln in his early days was a workingman—an athlete, and he never quite got the idea out of his head (and I am glad) that he was still a hewer of wood. He once told George William Curtis that he more than half expected yet to go back to the farm and earn his daily bread by the work that his hands found to do ; he dreamed of it nights, and whenever he saw a splendid toiler, he felt like hailing the man as brother and striking hands

WALT with him. When Lincoln saw Whitman strolling majestically past, he took him for a stevedore or possibly the foreman of a construction gang.

Whitman was fifty-one years old then. His long flowing beard was snow white and the shock that covered his Jove-like head was iron grey. His form was that of an Apollo who had arrived at years of discretion. He weighed even two hundred pounds and was just six feet high. His plain check cotton shirt was open at the throat to the breast ; and he had an independence, a self-sufficiency, and withal a cleanliness, a sweetness, a gentleness, that told that although he had a giant's strength he did not use it like a giant. Whitman used no tobacco, neither did he apply hot and rebellious liquors to his blood and with unblushing forehead woo the means of debility and disease. Up to his fifty-third year he had never known a sick day, although at thirty his hair had begun to whiten. He had the look of age in his youth and the look of youth in his age that often marks the exceptional man. But at fifty-three his splendid health was crowded to the breaking strain. How? Through

caring for wounded, sick and dying men : WALT hour after hour, day after day, through the WHITMAN long silent watches of the night. From 1864 to the day of his death in 1892, physically, he was a man in ruins. But he did not wither at the top. Through it all he held the healthy optimism of boyhood, carrying with him the perfume of the morning and the lavish heart of youth.

Doctor Bucke, who has been superintendent of a hospital for the insane for twenty years, and the intimate friend of Whitman all the time, has said : " His build, his stature, his exceptional health of mind and body, the size and form of his features, his cleanliness of mind and body, the grace of his movements and gestures, the grandeur, and especially the magnetism of his presence ; the charm of his voice, his genial kindly humor ; the simplicity of his habits and tastes, his freedom from convention, the largeness and beauty of his manner ; his calmness and majesty, his charity & forbearance—his entire unresentfulness under whatever provocation ; his liberality, his universal sympathy with humanity in all ages and lands, his broad tolerance, his catholic friend-

WALT WHITMAN liness, and his unexampled faculty of attracting affection, all prove his perfectly proportioned manliness."

But Whitman differed from the disciple of Lombroso in two notable particulars : He had no quarrel with the world, and he did not wax rich. "One thing thou lackest, O Walt Whitman !" we might have said to the poet, "you are not a financier." He died poor. But this is not proof of degeneracy, save on 'Change. When the children of Count Tolstoy endeavored to have him adjudged insane, the Court denied the application and voiced the wisest decision that ever came out of Russia : A man who gives away his money is not necessarily more foolish than he who saves it.

And with Mr. Horace L. Traubel I say : Whitman was the sanest man I ever saw.



OME men make themselves WALT homes ; and others there be who WHITMAN rent rooms. Walt Whitman was essentially a citizen of the world : the world was his home and mankind were his friends. There was a quality in the man peculiarly universal : a strong, virile poise that asked for nothing, but took what it needed.

He loved men as brothers, yet his brothers after the flesh understood him not ; he loved children—they turned to him instinctively—but he had no children of his own ; he loved women and yet this strongly sexed and manly man never loved a woman. And I might here say as Philip Gilbert Hamerton said of Turner, “ He was lamentably unfortunate in this : throughout his whole life he never came under the ennobling and refining influence of a good woman.”

It requires two to make a home. The first home was made when a woman, cradling in her loving arms a baby, crooned a lullaby. All the tender sentimentality we throw around a place is the result of the sacred thought that we live there with some one else. It is our

WALT home. The home is a tryst—the place where WHITMAN we retire and shut the world out. Lovers make a home just as birds make a nest, and unless a man knows the spell of the divine passion I hardly see how he can have a home at all. He only rents a room.

Camden is separated from the city of Philadelphia by the Delaware River. Camden lies low & flat—a great sandy, monotonous waste of straggling buildings. Here and there are straight rows of cheap houses, evidently erected by staid, broad-brimmed speculators from across the river, with eyes on the main chance. But they reckoned ill, for the town did not boom. Some of these houses have marble steps and white barn-door shutters, that might withstand a seige. When a funeral takes place in one of these houses the shutters are tied with strips of mournful black alpaca for a year and a day. Engineers, dockmen, express drivers, and mechanics largely make up citizens of Camden. Of course, Camden has its snug corner where prosperous merchants most do congregate: where they play croquet in the front yards, and have window boxes, and a piano and veranda chairs and terra cotta stat-

uary, but for the most part the houses of WALT
Camden are rented, and rented cheap.

WHITMAN

Many of the domiciles are frame and have the happy tumble-down look of the back streets in Charleston or Richmond—those streets where white trash merges off into prosperous colored aristocracy. Old hats do duty in keeping out the fresh air where providence has interfered and broken out a pane; blinds hang by a single hinge; bricks on the chimney tops threaten the passers-by; stringers and posts mark the place where proud picket fences once stood—the pickets having gone for kindling long ago. In the warm summer evenings men in shirt-sleeves sit on the front steps and stolidly smoke, while the children pile up sand in the streets and play in the gutters.

Parallel with Mickle Street, a block away, are railway tracks. There noisy switch engines, that never keep Sabbath, puff back and forth, day and night, sending forth showers of soot and smoke when the wind is right (and it usually is) straight over Number 328, where, according to John Addington Symonds and William Michael Rossetti, lived the mightiest

WALT seer of the century—the man whom they
WHITMAN rank with Socrates, Epictetus, St. Paul, Mi-
chael Angelo, and Dante.

It was in August of 1883 that I first walked up that little street—a hot sultry summer evening. There had been a shower that turned the dust of the unpaved roadway to mud. The air was close and muggy. The houses, built right up to the sidewalks, over which in little gutters the steaming sewage ran, seemed to have discharged their occupants into the street to enjoy the cool of the day. Barefooted children by the score paddled in the mud. All the steps were filled with loungers; some of the men had discarded not only coats but shirts as well and now sat in flaming red underwear, holding babies.

They say that “woman’s work is never done,” but to the women of Mickle Street this does not apply, but stay! perhaps their work is never done. Anyway, I remember that women sat on the curbs in calico dresses or leaned out of the windows, and all seemed supremely free from care.

“Can you tell me where Mr. Whitman lives?” I asked a portly dame who was rest-

ing her elbows on a window-sill near by. WALT

“ Who ? ”

W H I T M A N

“ Mr. Whitman ! ”

“ You mean Walt Whitman ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Show the gentleman, Molly, he 'll give you
a nickel, I 'm sure ! ”

I had not seen Molly. She stood behind me,
but as her mother spoke she seized tight hold
of one of my fingers, claiming me as her
lawful prey, and all the other children looked
on with envious eyes as little Molly threw
at them glances of scorn and marched me off.
Molly was five, going on six, she told me.
She had bright red hair, a grimy face and
little chapped feet that made not a sound as
we walked. She got her nickel and carried it
in her mouth and this made conversation dif-
ficult. After going one block she suddenly
stopped, squared me around and pointing said,
“ Them is he ! ” and disappeared.

In a wheeled rattan chair, in the hallway, a
little back from the door of a plain weather-
beaten house, sat the coatless philosopher, his
face and head wreathed in a tumult of snow-
white hair.

WALT WHITMAN I had a little speech, all prepared weeks before and committed to memory, that I intended to repeat, telling him how I had read his poems and admired them. And further I had stored away in my mind a few blades from "Leaves of Grass" that I proposed to bring out at the right time as a sort of certificate of character. But when that little girl jerked me right-about-face and heartlessly deserted me, I stared dumbly at the man whom I had come a hundred miles to see. I began angling for my little speech, but could not fetch it.

"Hello!" called the philosopher, out of the white aureole; "Hello! come here, boy!" ¶ He held out his hand, and there was a grasp with meaning in it.

"Don't go yet, Joe," he said to a man seated on the step, smoking a cob pipe.

"The old woman's calling me," said the swarthy Joe. Joe evidently held truth lightly.
"So long, Walt!"

"Good-bye, Joe. Sit down, lad, sit down!" ¶ I sat in the doorway at his feet.

"Now is n't it queer—that fellow is a regular philosopher and works out some great

problems, but he 's ashamed to express 'em. WALT
He could no more give you his best than he WHITMAN
could fly. Ashamed I s'pose, ashamed of the
best that is in him. We are all a little that
way—all but me—I try to write my best, re-
gardless of whether the thing sounds ridicu-
lous or not—regardless of what others think
or say or have said.) Ashamed of our holiest,
truest, and best ! Is it not too bad ?

“ You are twenty-five now ? Well boy, you
may grow until you are thirty and then you
will be as wise as you ever will be. Have n't
you noticed that men of sixty have no clearer
vision than men of forty ? One reason is that
we have been taught that we know all about
life and death and the mysteries of the grave.
But the main reason is that we are ashamed
to shove out and be ourselves. Jesus expressed
his own individuality perhaps more than any
man we know of, and so he wields a wider
influence than any other. And this though we
only have a record of just twenty-seven days
of his life.

“ Now that fellow that just left is an engineer,
and he dreams some beautiful dreams, but he
never expresses them to any one, only hints

WALT them to me, and this only at twilight. He is
WHITMAN like a weasel or mink or a whip-poor-will, he
comes out only at night.

“ ‘ If the weather was like this all the time, people would never learn to read and write,’ said Joe to me just as you arrived. And is n’t that so? Here we can count a hundred people up and down this street, and not one is reading, not one but that is just lolling about, except the children and they are only happy when playing in the dirt. Why if this tropical weather should continue we woudl all slip back into South Sea Islanders! You can only raise good men in a little strip around the North Temperate Zone—when you get out of the track of the glacier a tender hearted, sympathetic man of brains is an accident.”

¶ The old man suddenly ceased and I imagined that he was following the thought out in his own mind. We sat silent for a space. The twilight fell, and the lamp-lighter lit the street lamp on the corner. He stopped an instant to cheerily salute the poet as he passed. The man sitting on the doorstep, across the street, smoking, knocked the ashes out of his pipe on his boot-heel & went indoors. Women

called their children, who did not respond, WALT
but still played on. Then the creepers were WHITMAN
carried in, to be fed their bread and milk and
put to bed ; and shortly shrill feminine voices
ordered the older children indoors, and some
obeyed.

The night crept slowly on.

I heard old Walt chuckle behind me, talking
incoherently to himself, and then he said :

“ You are wondering why I live in such a
place as this ? ”

“ Yes, that is exactly what I was thinking
of ! ”

“ You think I belong in the country, in some
quiet shady place. But all I have to do is to
shut my eyes and go there. No man loves the
woods more than I—I was born within sound
of the sea—down on Long Island, and I know
all the songs that the sea-shell sings. But this
babble and babel of voices pleases me better,
especially since my legs went on a strike, for
although I can’t walk, you see I still mix
with the throng, so I suffer no loss. In the
woods a man must be all hands and feet. I
like the folks, the plain, ignorant, unpreten-
tious folks ; and the youngsters that come and

WALT slide on my cellar door do not disturb me a
WHITMAN bit. I 'm different from Carlyle—you know he had a noise-proof room where he locked himself in. Now when a huckster goes by, crying his wares, I open the blinds and often wrangle with the fellow over the price of things. But the rogues have got into a way lately of leaving truck for me and refusing pay. To-day an Irishman passed in three quarts of berries and walked off pretending to be mad because I offered to pay. When he was gone, I beckoned to the babies over the way—they came over and we had a feast.

“ Yes, I like the folks around here ; I like the women, and I like the men, and I like the babies, and I like the youngsters that play in the alley and make mud pies on my steps. I expect to stay here until I die.”

“ You speak of death as a matter of course—you are not afraid to die ? ”

“ Oh, no, my boy, death is as natural as life, and a deal kinder. But it is all good—I accept it all and give thanks—you have not forgotten my chant to death ? ”

“ Not I ? ”

I repeated a few lines from “ Drum Taps.”

He followed me, rapping gently with his cane WALT
on the floor, and with little interjectory re- WHITMAN
marks of "That 's so!" "Very true!"
"Good, good!" And when I faltered and
lost the lines he picked them up where "The
voice of my spirit tallied the song of the
bird." In a strong clear voice but a voice full
of sublime feeling he repeated :

Come, lovely and soothing Death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving,
arriving
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate Death.
Praised be the fathomless universe
For life and joy, and for objects and knowl-
edge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise ! praise !
praise
For the sure enwinding arms of cool, en-
folding Death.
Dark Mother, always gliding near with soft
feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest
welcome ?
Then I chant for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must in-
deed come, come unfalteringly,
Approach, strong deliveress,

WALT WHITMAN When it is so, when thou hast taken them
I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.
From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose, saluting thee,
 adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the
 high spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and
 thoughtful night.
The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering
 wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well
 veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.
Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the
 myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-packed cities all, & the teem-
 ing wharves, and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O
 Death.

The last playing youngster had silently disap-
peared from the streets. The doorsteps were
deserted—save where across the way a young
man and maiden sat in the gloaming con-
versing in low monotone.

¶ The clouds had drifted away.

WALT

A great yellow star shown out above the chimney tops in the east. WHITMAN

I arose to go.

"I wish you 'd come oftener—I see you so seldom, lad," said the old man, half plaintively.

I did not explain that we had never met before—that I had come from New York purposely to see him. He thought he knew me. And so he did—as much as I could impart. The rest was irrelevant. As to my occupation or name, what booted it?—he had no curiosity concerning me. I grasped his outstretched hand in both of my own.

He said not a word ; neither did I.

I turned and made my way to the ferry—past the whispering lovers on the doorsteps, and over the railway tracks where the noisy engines puffed. As I walked on board the boat the wind blew up cool and fresh from the west. The star in the east grew brighter, and other stars came out, reflecting themselves like gems in the dark blue of the Delaware.

¶ There was a soft sublimity in the sound of the bells that came echoing over the waters.



OST writers bear no message : they carry no torch. Sometimes they excite wonder, or they may amuse and divert — divert us from our work. To be diverted to a certain degree may be well, but there is a point where earth ends and cloudland begins, and even great poets occasionally befog the things which they would reveal.

Homer was seemingly blind to much simple truth ; Virgil carries you away from earth ; Horace was undone without his Macænas ; Dante makes you an exile ; Shakespeare was singularly silent concerning the doubts, difficulties, and common lives of common people ; Byron's Corsair life does not help you in your toil, and in his fight with English Bards and Scotch Reviewers we crave neutrality ; to be caught in the meshes of Pope's "Dunciad" is not pleasant ; and Lowell's "Fable for Critics" is only another "Dunciad." But above all poets who have ever lived, the author of "Leaves of Grass" was the poet of humanity.

Milton knew all about Heaven, and Dante conducts us through Hell, but it was left for

Whitman to show us Earth. His voice never WALT goes so high that it breaks in impotent fal- WHITMAN setto, neither does it growl and snarl at things it does not understand, and not understanding does not like. He was so great that he had no envy, and his insight was so sure that he had no prejudice. He never boasted that he was higher, nor claimed to be less than any of the other sons of men. He met all on terms of absolute equality, mixing with the poor, the lowly, the fallen, the oppressed, the cultured, the rich—simply as brother with brother. And when he said to the outcast, “Not till the sun excludes you will I exclude you,” he voiced a sentiment worthy of a god.

He was brother to the elements, the mountains, the seas, the clouds, the sky. He loved them all and partook of them all in his large, free, unselfish, untrammelled nature. His heart knew no limits, and feeling his feet mortis'd in granite and his footsteps tenon'd in infinity he knew the amplitude of time.

Only the great are generous; only the strong are forgiving. Like Lot's wife, most poets look back over their shoulders; and those who are not looking backward insist that we shall

WALT look into the future, and the vast majority of
WHITMAN the whole scribbling rabble accept the precept, "Man never is, but always to be blest."

¶ We grieve for childhood's happy days, and long for sweet rest in Heaven and sigh for mansions in the skies. And the people about us seem so indifferent, and our friends so luke-warm ; and really no one understands us, and our environment queers our budding spirituality and the frost of jealousy nips our aspirations : "O Paradise, O Paradise, the world is growing old ; who would not be at rest and free where love is never cold." So sing the fearsome dyspeptics of the stylus. O anæmic he, you bloodless she, nipping at crackers, sipping at tea, why not consider that although the evolutionists tell us where we came from and the theologians inform us where we are going to, yet the only thing we are really sure of is that we are here ! ¶ The present is the perpetually moving spot where history ends and prophecy begins. It is our only possession : the past we reach through lapsing memory, halting recollection, hearsay & belief; we pierce the future by wistful faith or anxious hope, but the present is beneath our feet.

Whitman sings the beauty and the glory of WALT the present. He rebukes our groans and sighs WHITMAN —bids us look about on every side at the wonders of creation, and at the miracles within our grasp. He lifts us up, restores us to our own, introduces us to man and Nature and thus infuses into us courage, manly pride, self-reliance, and the strong faith that comes when we feel our kinship with God.

He was so mixed with the universe that his voice took on the sway of elemental integrity and candor. Absolutely honest, this man was unafraid and unashamed, for Nature has neither apprehension, shame, nor vain-glory. In "Leaves of Grass" Whitman speaks as all men have ever spoken who believe in God & in themselves—oracular, without apology, without abasement—fearlessly. He tells of the powers and mysteries that pervade and guide all life, all death, all purpose. His work is masculine, as the sun is masculine; for the prophetic voice is as surely masculine as the lullaby and lyric cry are feminine.

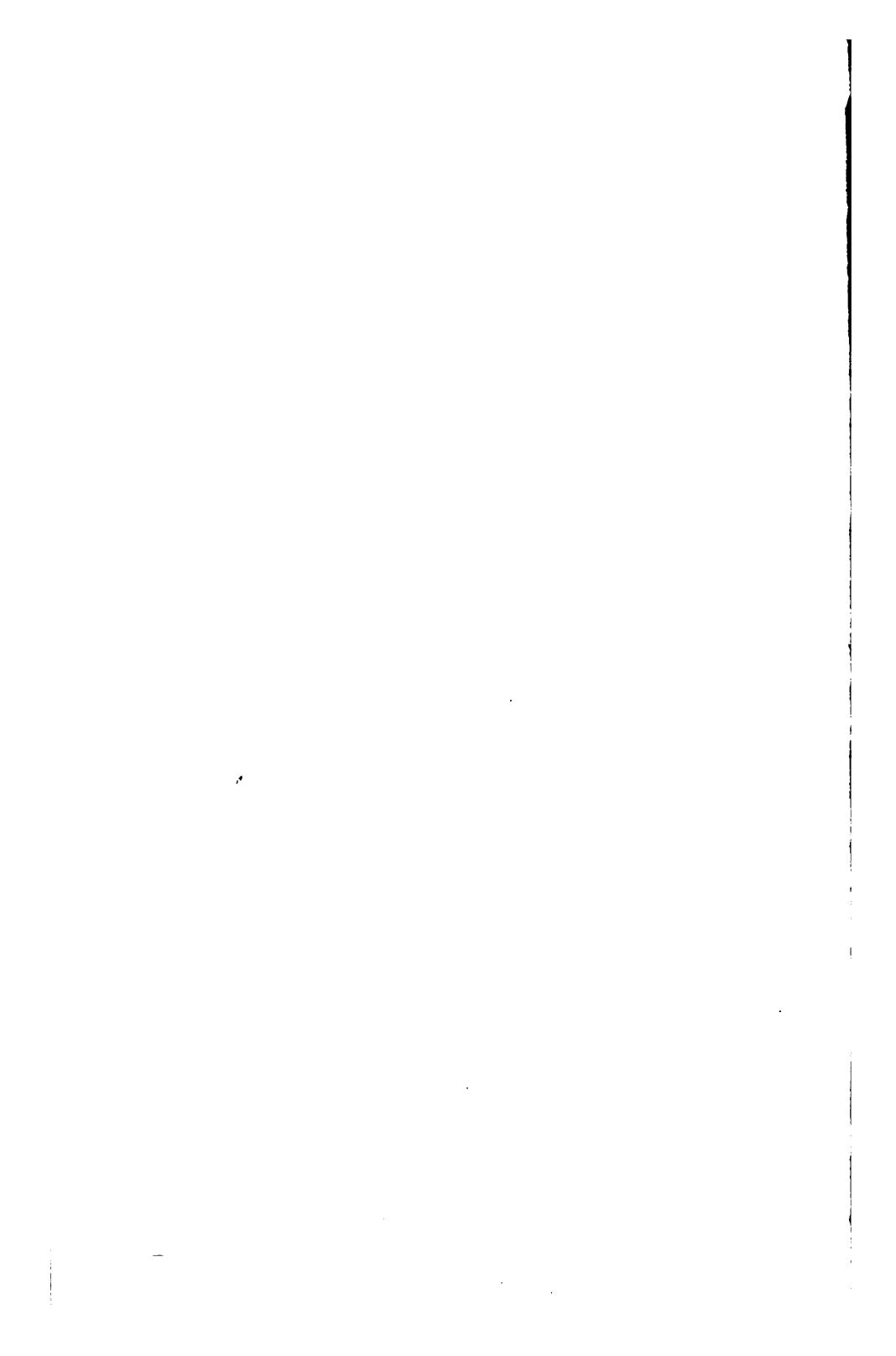
Whitman brings the warmth of the sun to the buds of the heart so that they open and bring forth form, color, perfume. He becomes

WALT for them aliment and dew; so these buds
WHITMAN come blossoms, fruits, tall branches, & stately
trees that cast refreshing shadows.

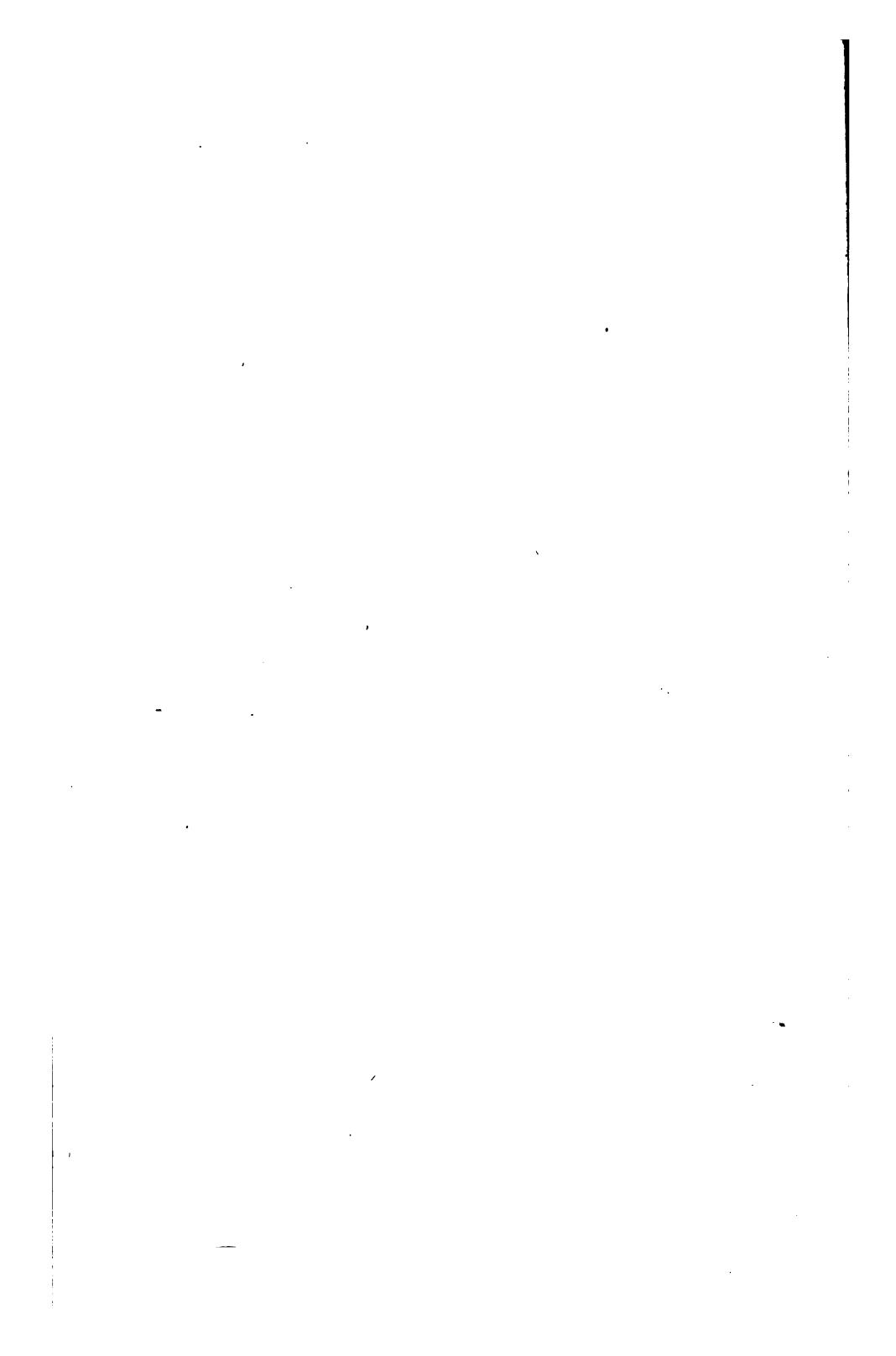
There are men who are to other men as the
shadow of a mighty rock in a weary land—
such is Walt Whitman.







WALT WHITMAN





F late years the name of WALT Walt Whitman has been a WHITMAN good deal bandied about in books and magazines. It has become familiar both in good and ill repute. His works have been largely bespattered with praise by his admirers, and cruelly mauled and mangled by irreverent enemies. Now, whether his poetry is good or bad as poetry, is a matter that may admit of a difference of opinion without alienating those who differ. We could not keep the peace with a man who should put forward claims to taste and yet deprecate the choruses in "Samson Agonistes"; but I think we may shake hands with one who sees no more in Walt Whitman's volume, from a literary point of view, than a farrago of incompetent essays in a wrong direction. That may not be at all our own opinion. We may

WALT think that, when a work contains so
WHITMAN many unforgettable phrases, it cannot
be altogether devoid of literary merit. We may even see passages of a high
poetry here and there among its eccentric contents. But when all is said,
Walt Whitman is neither a Milton
nor a Shakespeare; to appreciate his
works is not a condition necessary to
salvation; and I would not disinherit
a son upon, the question, nor even
think much the worse of a critic, for
I should always have an idea what he
meant.

What Whitman has to say is another
affair from how he says it. It is not
possible to acquit any one of defective
intelligence, or else stiff prejudice,
who is not interested by Whitman's
matter and the spirit it represents.
Not as a poet, but as what we must
call (for lack of a more exact expression)
a prophet, he occupies a

curious & prominent position. Wheth- WALT
er he may greatly influence the fu- WHITMAN
ture or not, he is a notable symptom
of the present. As a sign of the times,
it would be hard to find his parallel.
I should hazard a large wager, for
instance, that he was not unacquaint-
ed with the works of Herbert Spen-
cer; and yet where, in all the history
books, shall we lay our hands on two
more incongruous contemporaries?
Mr. Spencer so decorous—I had al-
most said, so dandy—in dissent; and
Whitman, like a large shaggy dog,
just unchained, scours the beaches of
the world, baying at the moon. And
when was an echo more curiously like
a satire, than when Mr. Spencer found
his Synthetic Philosophy reverberated
from the other shores of the Atlantic
in the “barbaric yawp” of Whitman?



HAT Whitman writes up to a system, it cannot be too soon explained. He was a theorizer about society before he was a poet. He first perceived something wanting, & then sat down squarely to supply the want. The reader, running over his works, will find that he takes nearly as much pleasure in critically expounding his theory of poetry as in making poems. This is as far as it can be from the case of the spontaneous village minstrel dear to elegy, who has no theory whatever, although sometimes, he may have fully as much poetry as Whitman. The whole of Whitman's work is deliberate and preconceived. A man born into a society comparatively new, full of conflicting elements and interests, could not fail, if he had any thoughts at all, to reflect upon the tendencies around him. He

saw much good and evil on all sides, WALT not yet settled down into some more WHITMAN or less unjust compromise as in older nations, but still in the act of settle-
ment. And he could not but wonder what it would turn out; whether the compromise would be very just or very/much the reverse, and give great or little scope for healthy human en-
ergies. From idle wonder to active speculation is but a step; & he seems to have been early struck with the inefficacy of literature and its ex-
treme unsuitability to the conditions. What he calls "Feudal Literature" could have little living action on the tumult of American democracy; what he calls the "Literature of Wo," meaning the whole tribe of Werther and Byron, could have no action for good in any time or place. Both prop-
ositions, if art had none but a direct moral influence, would be true

WALT enough; and as this seems to be WHITMAN Whitman's view, they were true enough for him. (He conceived the idea of a Literature which was to inhere in the life of the present; which was to be, first, human, and next, American;) which was to be brave & cheerful as per contract, to give culture in a popular and poetical presentation; and, in so doing, catch & stereotype some democratic ideal of humanity which should be equally natural to all grades of wealth and education, and suited, in one of his favorite phrases, to "the average man." To the formation of some such literature as this his poems are to be regarded as so many contributions, one sometimes explaining, sometimes superceding, the other: and the whole together not so much a finished work as a body of suggestive hints. He does not profess to have built the

castle, but he pretends he has traced WALT
the lines of the foundation. He has WHITMAN
not made the poetry, but he flatters
himself he has done something to-
wards making the poets.

His notion of the poetic function is
ambitious, & coincides roughly with
what Schopenhauer has laid down as
the province of the metaphysician.
The poet is to gather together for
men, and set in order, the materials
of their existence. He is "The An-
swerer"; he is to find some way of
speaking about life that shall satisfy,
if only for the moment, man's endur-
ing astonishment at his own position.
And besides having an answer ready,
it is he who shall provoke the ques-
tion. He must shake people out of
their indifference, and force them to
make some election in this world, in-
stead of sliding dully forward in a
dream. Life is a business we are all

WALT apt to mismanage; either living recklessly from day to day, or suffering ourselves to be gulled, out of our moments by the inanities of custom. We should despise a man who gave as little activity and forethought to the conduct of any other business. But in this, which is the one thing of all others, since it contains them all, we cannot see the forest for the trees. One brief impression obliterates another. There is something stupefying in the recurrence of unimportant things. And it is only on rare provocations that we can rise to take an outlook beyond daily concerns, and comprehend the narrow limits and great possibilities of our existence. It is the duty of the poet to induce such moments of clear sight. He is the declared enemy of all living by reflex action, of all that is done betwixt sleep and waking, of all the

pleasureless pleasures and imaginary WALT
duties in which we coin away our WHITMAN
hearts and fritter invaluable years. He
has to electrify his readers into an in-
stant unflagging activity, founded on
a wide and eager observation of the
world, and make them direct their
ways by a superior prudence, which
has little or nothing in common with
the maxims of the copy-book. That
many of us lead such lives as they
would heartily disown after two hours'
serious reflection on the subject is, I
am afraid, a true, and I am sure, a
very galling thought. The Enchanted
Ground of dead-alive respectability is
next, upon the map, to the Beulah
of considerate virtue. But there they
all slumber and take their rest in the
middle of God's beautiful and won-
derful universe; the drowsy heads
have nodded together in the same
position since first their fathers fell

WALT asleep ; and not even the sound of WHITMAN the last trumpet can wake them to a single active thought. The poet has a hard task before him to stir up such fellows to a sense of their own and other people's principles in life.

And it happens that literature is, in some ways, but an indifferent means to such an end. Language is but a poor bull's-eye lantern wherewith to show off the vast cathedral of the world ; and yet a particular thing once said in words is so definite and memorable, that it makes us forget the absence of the many which remain unexpressed ; like a bright window in a distant view, which dazzles & confuses our sight of its surroundings. There are not words enough in all Shakespeare to express the merest fraction of a man's experience in an hour. The speed of the eyesight and the hearing, and the continual in-

dustry of the mind, produce, in ten WALT minutes, what it would require a laborious volume to shadow forth by comparisons & roundabout approaches. If verbal logic were sufficient, life would be as plain sailing as a piece of Euclid. But, as a matter of fact, we make a travesty of the simplest process of thought when we put it into words ; for the words are all colored and forsworn, apply inaccurately, and bring with them, from former uses, ideas of praise and blame that have nothing to do with the question in hand. So we must always see to it nearly, that we judge by the realities of life and not by the partial terms that represent them in man's speech ; and at times of choice, we must leave words upon one side, and act upon those brute convictions, unexpressed and perhaps inexpressible, which cannot be flourished in an argument, but

WALT which are truly the sum and fruit of WHITMAN our experience. Words are for communication, not for judgment. This is what every thoughtful man knows for himself, for only fools and silly schoolmasters push definitions over far into the domain of conduct ; and the majority of women, not learned in these scholastic refinements, live all-of-a-piece and unconsciously, as a tree grows, without caring to put a name upon their acts or motives. Hence, a new difficulty for Whitman's scrupulous and argumentative poet ; he must do more than waken up the sleepers to his words ; he must persuade them to look over the book and at life with their own eyes.

This side of truth is ever present to Whitman ; it is this that he means when he tells us that "To glance with an eye confounds the learning of all times." But he is not unready.

He is never weary of descanting on WALT the undebatable conviction that is WHITMAN forced upon our minds by the presence of other men, of animals, or of inanimate things. To glance with an eye, were it only at a chair or a park railing, is by far a more persuasive process, and brings us to a far more exact conclusion, than to read the works of all the logicians extant. If both, by a large allowance, may be said to end in certainty, the certainty in the one case transcends the other to an incalculable degree. If people see a lion, they run away; if they only apprehend a deduction, they keep wandering around in an experimental humor. Now, how is the poet to convince like nature, and not like books? Is there no actual piece of nature that he can show the man to his face, as he might show him a tree if they were walking together? Yes,

WALT there is one: the man's own thoughts.

WHITMAN In fact, if the poet is to speak efficaciously, he must say what is already in his hearer's mind. That, alone, the hearer will believe; that, alone, he will be able to apply intelligently to the facts of life. Any conviction, even if it be a whole system or a whole religion, must pass into the condition of commonplace, or postulate, before it becomes fully operative. Strange excursions and high-flying theories may interest, but they cannot rule behavior. Our faith is not the highest truth that we perceive, but the highest that we have been able to assimilate into the very texture & method of our thinking. It is not, therefore, by flashing before a man's eyes the weapons of dialectic; it is not by induction, deduction, or construction; it is not by forcing him on from one stage of reasoning to another, that

the man will be effectually renewed. WALT WHITMAN
He cannot be made to believe anything; but he can be made to see that he has always believed it. And this is the practical canon. It is when the reader cries, "Oh, I know!" and is, perhaps, half irritated to see how nearly the author has forestalled his own thoughts, that he is on the way to what is called in theology a Saving Faith.

Here we have the key to Whitman's attitude. To give a certain unity of ideal to the average population of America—to gather their activities about some conception of humanity that shall be central and normal, if only for the moment—the poet must portray that population as it is. Like human law, human poetry is simply declaratory. If any ideal is possible, it must be already in the thoughts of the people; and by the same reason,

WALT in the thoughts of the poet, who is WHITMAN one of them. And hence Whitman's own formula: "The poet is individual—he is complete in himself: the others are as good as he; only he sees it, and they do not." To show them how good they are, the poet must study his fellow-countrymen & himself somewhat like a traveller on the hunt for his book of travels. There is a sense, of course, in which all true books are books of travel; and all genuine poets must run their risk of being charged with the traveller's exaggeration; for to whom are such books more surprising than to those whose own life is faithfully & smartly pictured? But this danger is all upon one side; and you may judiciously flatter the portrait without any likelihood of the sitter's disowning it for a faithful likeness. And so Whitman has reasoned: that by drawing at first

hand from himself and his neighbors, WALT
accepting without shame the incon- WHITMAN
sistencies and brutalities that go to
make up man, and yet treating the
whole in a high, magnanimous spirit,
he would make sure of belief, and
at the same time encourage people
forward by the means of praise.

WALT
WHITMAN



OWADAYS we are accustomed to a great deal of pulling over the circumstances in which we are placed. The great refinement of many poetical gentlemen has rendered them practically unfit for the jostling and ugliness of life, and they record their unfitness at considerable length. The bold and awful poetry of Job's complaint produces too many flimsy imitators; for there is always something consolatory in grandeur, but the symphony transposed for the piano becomes hysterically sad. This literature of woe, as Whitman calls it, this *Maladie de Rene*, as we like to call it in Europe, is in many ways a most humiliating and sickly phenomenon. Young gentlemen with three or four hundred a year of private means look down from a pinnacle of doleful experience on all the grown & hearty

men who have dared to say a good WALT word for life since the beginning of WHITMAN the world. There is no prophet but the melancholy Jacques, and the blue devils dance on all our literary wires.

¶ It would be a poor service to spread culture, if this be its result, among the comparatively innocent and cheerful ranks of men. When our little poets have to be sent to look at the ploughman and learn wisdom, we must be careful how we tamper with our ploughmen. When a man in not the best of circumstances preserves composure of mind, & relishes ale and tobacco, and his wife and children, in the intervals of dull and unremunerative labor; where a man in this predicament can afford a lesson by the way to what are called his intellectual superiors, there is plainly something to be lost, as well as something to be gained, by teach-

WALT ing him to think differently. It is WHITMAN better to leave him as he is than to teach him whining. It is better that he should go without the cheerful lights of culture, if cheerless doubt and paralyzing sentimentalism are to be the consequence. Let us, by all means, fight against that hide-bound stolidity of sensation and sluggishness of mind which blurs and decolorizes for poor natures the wonderful pageant of consciousness ; let us teach people, as much as we can, to enjoy, and they will learn for themselves to sympathize ; but let us see to it, above all, that we give these lessons in a brave, vivacious note, and build the man up in courage while we demolish the substitute, indifference.

Whitman is alive to all this. He sees that, if the poet is to be of any help, he must testify to the liyableness of life. His poems, he tells us, are to be

“hymns of the praise of things.” They WALT are to make for a certain high joy in WHITMAN living, or what he calls himself “a brave delight fit for freedom’s athletes.” And he has had no difficulty in introducing his optimism: it fitted readily enough with his system; for the average man is truly a courageous person and truly fond of living. One of Whitman’s remarks upon this head is worth quotation, as he is there perfectly successful, and does precisely what he designs to do throughout: Takes ordinary and even commonplace circumstances; throws them out, by a happy turn of thinking, into significance and something like beauty; and tacks a hopeful moral lesson to the end.

“The passionate tenacity of hunters, woodmen, early risers, cultivators of gardens and orchards and fields, the love of healthy women for the manly

WALT form, seafaring persons, drivers of
WHITMAN horses, the passion for light and the
open air,—all is an old unvaried sign
of the unfailing perception of beauty,
and of a residence of the poetic in
outdoor people.”

There seems to be something truly
original in this choice of trite exam-
ples. You will remark how adroitly
Whitman begins, hunters and wood-
men being confessedly romantic. And
one thing more. If he had said “the
love of healthy men for the female
form,” he would have said almost a
silliness; for the thing has never been
dissembled out of delicacy, and is so
obvious as to be a public nuisance.
But by reversing it, he tells us some-
thing not unlike news; something
that sounds quite freshly in words;
and if the reader be a man, gives
him a moment of great self-satisfac-
tion and spiritual aggrandizement. In

many different authors you find passages more remarkable for grammar, WALT WHITMAN but few of a more ingenious turn, & none that could be more to the point in our connection. The tenacity of many ordinary people in ordinary pursuits is a sort of standing challenge to everybody else. If one man can grow absorbed in delving his garden, others may grow absorbed and happy over something else. Not to be upsides in this with any groom or gardner, is to be very meanly organized. A man should be ashamed to take his food if he has not alchemy enough in his stomach to turn some of it into intense and enjoyable occupation.

Whitman tries to reinforce this cheerfulness by keeping up a sort of outdoor atmosphere of sentiment. His book, he tells us, should be read "among the cooling influences of

WALT external nature; " and this recommendation, like that other famous one which Hawthorne prefixed to his collected tales, is in itself a character of the work. Every one who has been upon a walking or a boating tour, living in the open air, with the body in constant exercise and the mind in fallow, knows true ease and quiet. The irritating action of the brain is set at rest; we think in a plain, unfeverish temper; little things seem big enough, & great things no longer portentious; and the world is smilingly accepted as it is. This is the spirit that Whitman inculcates and parades. He thinks very ill of the atmosphere of parlors or libraries. Wisdom keeps school outdoors. And he has the art to recommend this attitude of mind by simply pluming himself upon it as a virtue; so that the reader, to keep the advantage

over his author which most readers WALT enjoy, is tricked into professing the WHITMAN same view. And this spirit, as it is his chief lesson, is the greatest charm of his work. Thence, in spite of an uneven and emphatic key of expression, something trenchant and straightforward, something simple and surprising, distinguishes his poems. He has sayings that come home to one like the Bible. We fall upon Whitman, after the works of so many men who write better, with a sense of relief from strain, with a sense of touching nature, as when one passes out of the flaring, noisy thoroughfares of a great city into what he himself has called, with unexcelled imaginative justice of language, "the huge and thoughtful night." And his book in consequence, whatever may be the final judgment of its merit, whatever may be its influence on the future, should be in

WALT the hands of all parents & guard-
WHITMAN ians as a specific for the distressing
malady of being seventeen years old.
Green-sickness yields to his treat-
ment as to a charm of magic; and
the youth, after a short course of
reading, ceases to carry the universe
upon his shoulders.

FAMILIARITY could not WALT
deceive Whitman. He con- WHITMAN
siders it just as wonderful
that there are myriads of
stars, as that one man should rise
from the dead. He declares "a hair
on the back of his hand just as curi-
ous as any special revelation." His
whole life is to him what it was to
Sir Thomas Browne, one perpetual
miracle. Everything is strange, every-
thing unaccountable, everything beau-
tiful; from a bug to the moon, from
the sight of the eyes to the appetite
for food. He makes it his business to
see things as if he saw them for the
first time, and professes astonishment
on principle. But he has no leaning
toward mythology; avows his con-
tempt for what he calls "unregener-
ate poetry"; and does not mean by
nature:

"The smooth walks, trimmed hedges,

WALT butterflies, posies, and nightingales of **WHITMAN** the English poets, but the whole orb, with its geologic history, the Kosmos, carrying fire and snow, that rolls through the illimitable areas, light as a feather though weighing billions of tons."

Nor is this exhaustive; for in his character of idealist all impressions, all thoughts, trees and people, love and faith, astronomy, history, and religion, enter upon equal terms into his notion of the universe. He is not against religion; not, indeed, against any religion. He wishes to drag with a larger net, not to make more comprehensive synthesis, than any or than all of them put together. In feeling after the central type of man, he must embrace all eccentricities; his cosmology must subsume all cosmologies, and the feelings that gave birth to them; his statement of facts must

include all religion and all irreligion, WALT Christ and Boodha, God and the WHITMAN devil. The world as it is, & the whole world as it is, physical, and spiritual, and historical, with its good and bad, with its manifold inconsistencies, is what he wishes to set forth, in strong, picturesque, and popular lineaments, for the understanding of the average man. One of his favorite endeavors is to get the whole matter into a nutshell; to knock the four corners of the universe, one after another, about his readers' ears; to hurry him, in breathless phrases, hither and thither, back and forward, in time and space; to focus all this about his own momentary personality; and then, drawing the ground from under his feet, as if by some cataclysm of nature, to plunge him into the unfathomable abyss sown with enormous suns and systems, and among the inconceivable

WALT numbers and magnitudes and velocities of the heavenly bodies. So that WHITMAN he concludes by striking into us some sense of that disproportion of things which Shelley had illuminated by the ironical flash of these eight words: The desire of the moth for the star.

The same truth, but to what a different purpose! Whitman's moth is mightily at his ease about all the planets in heaven, and cannot think too highly of our sublunary tapers. The universe is so large that imagination flags in the effort to conceive it; but here, in the meantime, is the world under our feet, a very warm and habitable corner. "The earth, that is sufficient; I do not want the constellations any nearer," he remarks. And again: "Let your soul stand cool and composed," says he, "before a million universes." It is

the language of a transcendental WALT common sense, such as Thoreau held WHITMAN and sometimes uttered. But Whitman, who has a somewhat vulgar inclination for technical talk and the jargon of philosophy, is not content with a few pregnant hints; he must put the dots upon his i's; he must corroborate the songs of Apollo by some of the darkest talk of human metaphysic. He tells his disciples that they must be ready "to confront the growing arrogance of Realism." Each person is, for himself, the keystone and the occasion of this universal edifice. "Nothing, not God," he says, "is greater to one than oneself is;" a statement with an irreligious smack at the first sight; but like most startling sayings, a manifest truism on a second. He will give effect to his own character without apology; he sees "that the elementary laws never

WALT apologize." "I reckon," he adds, WHITMAN with quaint colloquial arrogance, "I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by, after all." The level follows the law of its being; so, unrelentingly, will he; everything, every person, is good in his own place and way; God is the maker of all, and all are in one design. For he believes in God, & that with a sort of blasphemous security. "No array of terms," quoth he, "no array of terms can say how much at peace I am about God and about death." There certainly never was a prophet who carried things with a higher hand; he gives us less a body of dogmas than a series of proclamations by the grace of God; and language, you will observe, positively fails him to express how far he stands above the highest human doubts and trepidations.

But next in order of truths to a person's sublime conviction of himself, WALT WHITMAN comes the attraction of one person for another, and all that we mean by the word love:—

“The dear love of man for his comrade—the attraction of friend for friend,
Of the well-married husband & wife,
of children and parents,
Of city for city and land for land.”

The solitude of the most sublime idealist is broken in upon by other people's faces; he sees a look in their eyes that corresponds to something in his own heart; there comes a tone in their voices which convicts him of a startling weakness for his fellow-creatures. While he is hymning the *ego* and commerçing with God and the universe, a woman goes below his window; and at the turn of her skirt

WALT or the color of her eyes, Icarus is re-
WHITMAN called from heaven by the sun. Love
is so startlingly real that it takes rank
upon an equal footing of reality with
the consciousness of personal exist-
ence. We are as heartily persuaded of
the identity of those we love as of
our own identity. And so sympathy
pairs with self-assertion, the two ger-
ents of human life on earth; and
Whitman's ideal man must not only
be strong, free, and self-reliant in
himself, but his freedom must be
bounded and his strength perfected
by the most intimate, eager, & long-
suffering love for others. To some
extent this is taking away with the
left hand what has been so generously
given with the right. Morality has
been ceremoniously extruded from
the door only to be brought in again
by the window. We are told, on one
page, to do as we please; and on the

next we are sharply upbraided for not WALT having done as the author pleases. We WHITMAN are first assured that we are the finest fellows in the world in our own right; and then it appears that we are only fine fellows in so far as we practise a most quixotic code of morals. The disciple who saw himself in clear ether a moment before is plunged down again among the fogs and complications of duty. And this is all the more overwhelming because Whitman insists not only on love between sex and sex, and between friends of the same sex, but in the field of the less intense political sympathies; and his ideal man must not only be a generous friend but a conscientious voter into the bargain.

His method somewhat lessens the difficulty. He is not, the reader will remember, to tell us how good we ought to be, but to remind us how good we

WALT are. He is to encourage us to be free & **WHITMAN** kind, by proving that we are free and kind already. He passes our corporate life under review, to show that it is upheld by the very virtues of which he makes himself the advocate. "There is no object so soft," he says somewhere in his big, plain way, "there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe." Rightly understood, it is on the softest of all objects, the sympathetic heart, that the wheel of society turns easily and securely as on a perfect axle. There is no room, of course, for doubt or discussion about conduct, where every one is to follow the law of his being with exact compliance. Whitman hates doubt, deprecates discussion, and discourages to his utmost the craving, carping sensibilities of the conscience. We are to imitate, to use one of his absurd and happy phrases, "the sat-

isfaction and aplomb of animals." If WALT he preaches a sort of ranting Chris- WHITMAN tianity in morals, a fit consequent to the ranting optimism of his cosmology, it is because he declares it to be the original deliverance of the human heart; or at least, for he would be honestly historical in method, of the human heart as at present Christianized. His is a morality without a prohibition; his policy is one of encouragement all around. A man must be a born hero to come up to Whitman's standard in the practice of any of the positive virtues; but of a negative virtue, such as temperance or chastity, he has so little to say, that the reader need not be surprised if he drops a word or two upon the other side. He would lay down nothing that would be a clog; he would prescribe nothing that cannot be done ruddily, in a heat. The great point is to get people under way.

WALT To the faithful Whitmanite this would
WHITMAN be justified by the belief that God
made all, and that all was good; the
prophet in his doctrine, has only to
cry "Tally-ho," and mankind will
break into a gallop on the road to
El Dorado. Perhaps, to another class
of minds, it may look like the result
of the somewhat cynical reflection
that you will not make a kind man
out of one who is unkind by any
precepts under heaven; tempered by
the belief that, in natural circum-
stances, the large majority is well dis-
posed. Thence it would follow, that
if you can only get every one to feel
more warmly and act more courage-
ously, the balance of results will be
for good.

So far, you see, the doctrine is pretty
coherent as a doctrine; as a picture
of man's life it is incomplete & mis-
leading, although eminently cheerful.

This he is himself the first to ac- WALT
knowledge; for if he is prophetic in WHITMAN
anything, it is in his noble disregard
of consistency. "Do I contradict my-
self?" he asks somewhere; and then
pat comes the answer, the best an-
swer ever given in print, worthy of a
sage, or rather of a woman: "Very
well, then, I contradict myself!"
with this addition, not so feminine &
perhaps not altogether so satisfactory:
"I am large—I contain multitudes."
Life, as a matter of fact, partakes
largely of the nature of tragedy. The
gospel according to Whitman, even
if it be not so logical, has this ad-
vantage over the gospel according to
Pangloss, that it does not utterly dis-
regard the existence of temporal evil.
Whitman accepts the fact of disease
and wretchedness like an honest man;
and instead of trying to qualify it in
the interest of his optimism, sets him-

WALT self to spur people up to be helpful.
WHITMAN He expresses a conviction, indeed, that all will be made up to the victims in the end; that "what is untried and afterward" will fail no one, not even "the old man who has lived without purpose and feels it with bitterness worse than gall." But this is not to palliate our sense of what is hard or melancholy in the present. Pangloss, smarting under one of the worst things that ever was supposed to come from America, consoled himself with the reflection that it was the price we have to pay for cochineal. And with that murderous parody, logical optimism and the praises of the best of possible words went irrevocably out of season, and have been no more heard of in the mouths of reasonable men. Whitman spares us all allusions to the cochineal; he treats evil and sorrow in a spirit

almost as of welcome; as an old sea- WALT dog might have welcomed the sight WHITMAN of the enemy's topsails off the Spanish Main. There, at least, he seems to say, is something obvious to be done. I do not know many better things in literature than the brief pictures,—brief and vivid like things seen by lightning,—with which he tries to stir up the world's heart upon the side of mercy. He braces us, on the one hand, with examples of heroic duty and helpfulness; on the other, he touches us with pitiful instances of people needing help. He knows how to make the heart beat at a brave story; to inflame us with just resentment over the hunted slave; to stop our mouths for shame when he tells of the drunken prostitute. For all the afflicted, all the weak, all the wicked, a good word is said in a spirit which I can only call one of

WALT ultra-Christianity; and however wild,
WHITMAN however contradictory, it may be in
parts, this at least may be said for
his book, as it may be said of the
Christian Gospels, that no one will
read it, however respectable, but he
gets a knock upon his conscience;
no one, however fallen, but he finds
a kindly and supporting welcome.

HE has not been content WALT with merely blowing the WHITMAN trumpet for the battle of well-doing; he has given to his precepts the authority of his own brave example. Naturally a grave, believing man, with little or no sense of humor, he has succeeded as well in life as in his printed performances. The spirit that was in him has come forth most eloquently in his actions. Many who have only read his poetry have been tempted to set him down as an ass, or even as a charlatan; but I never met any one who had known him personally who did not profess a solid affection and respect for the man's character. He practises as he professes; he feels deeply that Christian love for all men, that toleration, that cheerful delight in serving others, which he often celebrates in literature with a doubtful measure of

WALT success. And perhaps, out of all his WHITMAN writings, the best and the most human and convincing passages are to be found in “these soil’d and creas’d little livraisons, each composed of a sheet or two of paper, folded small to carry in the pocket, and fastened with a pin,” which he scribbled during the war by the bedsides of the wounded or in the excitement of great events. They are hardly literature in the formal meaning of the word; he has left his jottings for the most part as he made them; a homely detail, a word from the lips of a dying soldier, a business memorandum, the copy of a letter—short, straightforward to the point, with none of the trappings of composition; but they breathe a profound sentiment, they give us a vivid look at one of the sides of life, and they make us acquainted with a man

whom it is an honor to love. ¶ WALT
man's intense Americanism, his un- WHITMAN
limited belief in the future of These
States (as, with reverential capitals,
he loves to call them), made the war
a period of great trial to his soul.
The new virtue, Unionism, of which
he is the sole inventor, seemed to
have fallen into premature unpopu-
larity. All that he loved, hoped, or
hated, hung in the balance. And the
game of war was not only momen-
tous to him in its issues; it subli-
mated his spirit by its heroic displays,
and tortured him intimately by the
spectacle of its horrors. It was a the-
atre, it was a place of education, it
was like a season of religious revival.
He watched Lincoln going daily to
his work; he studied and fraternized
with young soldiery passing to the
front; above all, he walked the hos-
pitals, reading the Bible, distributing

WALT clean clothes, or apples, or tobacco ; WHITMAN a patient, helpful, reverend man, full of kind speeches.

His memoranda of this period are almost bewildering to read. From one point of view they seem those of a district visitor ; from another, they look like the formless jottings of an artist in the picturesque. More than one woman, on whom I tried the experiment, immediately claimed the writer for a fellow-woman. More than one literary purist might identify him as a shoddy newspaper correspondent without the necessary faculty of style. And yet the story touches home ; and if you are of the weeping order of mankind, you will certainly find your eyes fill with tears, of which you have no reason to be ashamed. There is only one way to characterize a work of this order, and that is to quote. Here is a passage from a letter to a

mother, unknown to Whitman, whose WALT
son died in hospital:—

WHITMAN

“Frank, as far as I saw, had every-
thing requisite in surgical treatment,
nursing, etc. He had watches much of
the time. He was so good and well-
behaved, and affectionate, I myself
liked him very much. I was in the
habit of coming in afternoons and sit-
ting by him, and he liked to have me
—liked to put out his arm and lay
his hand on my knee—would keep it
so a long while. Toward the last he
was more restless and flighty at night
—often fancied himself with his reg-
iment—by his talk sometimes seem'd
as if his feelings were hurt by being
blamed by his officers for something
he was entirely innocent of—said ‘I
never in my life was thought capable
of such a thing, and never was.’ At
other times he would fancy himself
talking as it seem'd to children or

WALT such like, his relatives, I suppose, and WHITMAN giving them good advice; would talk to them a long while. All the time he was out of his head not one single bad word, or thought, or idea escaped him. It was remark'd that many a man's conversation in his senses was not half so good as Frank's delirium.

“He was perfectly willing to die—he had become very weak, and had suffer'd a good deal, and was perfectly resign'd, poor boy. I do not know his past life, but I feel as if it must have been good. At any rate what I saw of him here, under the most trying circumstances, with a painful wound, and among strangers, I can say that he behaved so brave, so composed, and so sweet and affectionate, it could not be surpassed. And now, like many other noble and good men, after serving his country

as a soldier, he has yielded up his WALT young life at the very outset in her WHITMAN service. Such things are gloomy—yet there is a text, ‘God doeth all things well,’ the meaning of which, after due time, appears to the soul.

“I thought perhaps a few words, though from a stranger, about your son, from one who was with him at the last, might be worth while, for I loved the young man, though I but saw him immediately to lose him.”

It is easy enough to pick holes in the grammar of this letter, but what are we to say of its profound goodness and tenderness? It is written as though he had the mother’s face before his eyes, and saw her wincing in the flesh at every word. And what, again, are we to say of its sober truthfulness, not exaggerating, not running to phrases, not seeking to make a hero out of what was only

WALT an ordinary but good & brave young WHITMAN man? Literary reticence is not Whitman's stronghold; and this reticence is not literary, but humane; it is not that of a good artist but that of a good man. He knew that what the mother wished to hear about was Frank; and he told her about her Frank as he was.

HERE something should be WALT said of Whitman's style, WHITMAN for style is of the essence of thinking. And where a man is so critically deliberate as our author, and goes solemnly about his poetry for an ulterior end, every indication is worth notice. He has chosen a rough, unrhymed, lyrical verse; sometimes instinct with a fine processional movement; often so rugged and careless that it can only be described by saying that he has not taken the trouble to write prose. I believe myself that it was selected principally because it was easy to write, although not without recollections of the marching measures of some of the prose in our English Old Testament. According to Whitman, on the other hand, "the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between Prose and

WALT Poetry . . . for the most cogent pur-
WHITMAN poses of those great inland states, &
for Texas, and California, and Oregon;”—a statement which is among
the happiest achievements of Amer-
ican humor. He calls his verses “rec-
itatatives,” in easily followed allusion
to a musical form. “Easily-written,
loose-fingered chords,” he cries, “I
feel the thrum of your climax and
close.” Too often, I fear, he is the
only one who can perceive the
rhythm; and in spite of Mr. Swin-
burne, a great part of his work con-
sidered as verse is poor bald stuff.
Considered, not as verse, but as
speech, a great part of it is full of
strange and admirable merits. The
right detail is seized; the right word,
bold and trenchant, is thrust into its
place. Whitman has small regard to
literary decencies, and is totally free
from literary timidities. He is neither

afraid of being slangy nor of being WALT
dull; nor, let me add, of being ri- WHITMAN
diculous. The result is a most sur-
prising compound of plain grandeur,
sentimental affectation, and down-
right nonsense. It would be useless
to follow his detractors and give in-
stances of how bad he can be at his
worst; and perhaps it would be not
much wiser to give extracted speci-
mens of how happily he can write
when he is at his best. These come
in to most advantage in their own
place; owing something, it may be,
to the offset of their curious sur-
roundings. And one thing is certain,
that no one can appreciate Whit-
man's excellences until he has grown
accustomed to his faults. Until you
are content to pick poetry out of his
pages almost as you must pick it out
of a Greek play in Bohn's translation,
your gravity will be continually up-

WALT set, your ears perpetually disappointed,
WHITMAN ed, and the whole book will be no
more to you than a particularly flagrant production by the Poet Close.

¶ A writer of this uncertain quality was, perhaps, unfortunate in taking for thesis the beauty of the world as it now is, not only on the hill-tops, but in the factory; not only by the harbor full of stately ships, but in the magazine of the hopelessly prosaic hatter. To show beauty in common things is the work of the rarest tact. It is not to be done by the wishing. It is easy to posit as a theory, but to bring it home to men's minds is the problem of literature, and is only accomplished by rare talent, and in comparatively rare instances. To bid the whole world stand and deliver, with a dogma in one's right hand by way of pistol; to cover reams of paper in a galloping,

headstrong vein; to cry louder and WALT louder over everything as it comes WHITMAN up, and make no distinction in one's enthusiasm over the most incomparable matters; to prove one's entire want of sympathy for the jaded, literary palate, by calling, not a spade a spade, but a hatter a hatter, in a lyrical apostrophe;—this, in spite of all the airs of inspiration, is not the way to do it. It may be very wrong, and very wounding to a respectable branch of industry, but the word "hatter" cannot be used seriously in emotional verse; not to understand this, is to have no literary tact; and I would, for his own sake, that this were the only inadmissible expression with which Whitman had bedecked his pages. The book teems with similar comicalities; and to a reader who is determined to take it from that side only, presents a per-

WALT fect carnival of fun. A good deal of WHITMAN this is the result of theory playing its usual vile trick upon the artist. It is because he is a Democrat that Whitman must have in the hatter. If you may say Admiral, he reasons, why may you not say Hatter? One man is as good as another, and it is the business of the "great poet" to show poetry in the life of the one as well as the other. A most incontrovertible sentiment surely, and one which nobody would think of controverting, where—and here is the point—where any beauty has been shown. But how, where that is not the case? where the hatter is simply introduced, as God made him and as his fellow-men have miscalled him, at the crisis of a high-flown rhapsody? And what are we to say, where a man of Whitman's notable capacity for putting things in a bright, pic-

turesque, and novel way, simply gives WALT up the attempt, and indulges, with WHITMAN apparent exultation, in an inventory of trades or implements, with no more color or coherence than in so many index-words out of a dictionary? I do not know that we can say anything, but that it is a prodigiously amusing exhibition for a line or so. The worst of it is, that Whitman must have known better. The man is a great critic, & so far as I can make out, a good one; and how much criticism does it require to know that capitulation is not description, or that fingering on a dumb keyboard, with whatsoever show of sentiment and execution, is not at all the same thing as discoursing music? I wish I could believe he was quite honest with us; but, indeed, who was ever quite honest who wrote a book for a purpose? It is a flight beyond the

WALT reach of human magnanimity. One WHITMAN other point, where his means failed him, must be touched upon, however shortly. In his desire to accept all facts loyally and simply, it fell within his programme to speak at some length and with some plainness on what is, for I really do not know what reason, the most delicate of subjects. Seeing in that one of the most serious and interesting parts of life, he was aggrieved that it should be looked upon as ridiculous or shameful. No one speaks of maternity with his tongue in his cheek; and Whitman made a bold push to set the sanctity of fatherhood beside the sanctity of motherhood, & introduce this also among the things that can be spoken of without either a blush or a wink. But the Philistines have been too strong; and to say truth, Whitman has rather played the fool.

We may be thoroughly conscious that WALT his end is improving; that it would WHITMAN be a good thing if a window were opened on these close privacies of life; that on this subject, as on all others, he now and then lets fall a pregnant saying. But we are not satisfied. We feel that he was not the man for so difficult an enterprise. He loses our sympathy in the character of a poet by attracting too much of our attention in that of a Bull in a China Shop. And where, by a little more art, we might have been solemnized ourselves, it is too often Whitman alone who is solemn in the face of an audience somewhat indecorously amused.



INALLY, as most important, after all, to human beings in our disputable state, what is that higher prudence which was to be the aim and issue of these deliberate productions? ¶ Whitman is too clever to slip into a succinct formula. If he could have adequately said his say in a single proverb, it is to be presumed he would not have put himself to the trouble of writing several volumes. It was his programme to state as much as he could of the world with all its contradictions, and leave the upshot with God who planned it. What he has made of the world and the world's meanings is to be found at large in his poems. These altogether give his answers to the problems of belief and conduct; in many ways righteous and high-spirited, in some ways loose and contradictory. And yet there are two

passages from the preface to the WALT
“Leaves of Grass” which do pretty WHITMAN
well condense his teaching on all es-
sential points, & yet preserve a meas-
ure of his spirit.

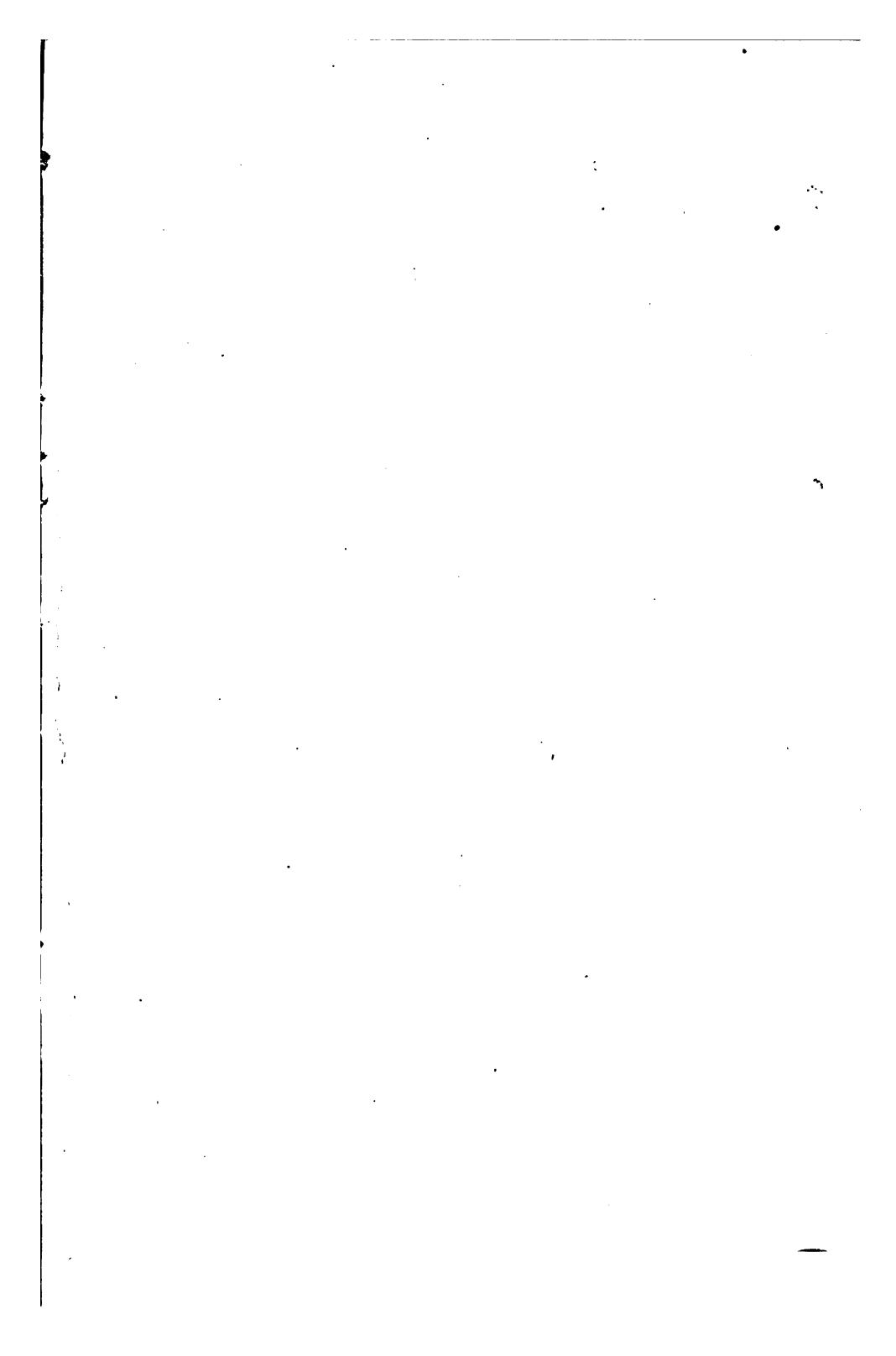
“This is what you shall do,” he says
in the one, “love the earth, and sun,
and animals, despise riches, give alms
to every one that asks, stand up for
the stupid and crazy, devote your in-
come and labor to others, hate tyrants,
argue not concerning God, have pa-
tience and indulgence toward the peo-
ple, take off your hat to nothing
known or unknown, or to any man
or number of men; go freely with
powerful uneducated persons, and
with the young, and mothers of fam-
ilies, read these leaves (his own works)
in the open air every season of every
year of your life; re-examine all you
have been told at school or church,
or in any book, and dismiss whatever

WALT insults your own soul." ¶ "The prudence of the greatest poet," he adds in the other—and the greatest poet is, of course, himself—"knows that the young man who composedly perilled his life and lost it, has done exceeding well for himself; while the man who has not perilled his life, and retains it to old age in riches and ease, has perhaps achieved nothing for himself worth mentioning; and that only that person has no great prudence to learn, who has learnt to prefer real long-lived things, and favors body and soul the same, and perceives the indirect surely following the direct, and what evil or good he does leaping onward and waiting to meet him again, and who in his spirit, in any emergency whatever, neither hurries nor avoids death."

There is much that is Christian in these extracts, startlingly Christian.

Any reader who bears in mind Whit-WALT man's own advice and "dismisses WHITMAN whatever insults his own soul" will find plenty that is bracing, brightening, and chastening to reward him for a little patience at first. It seems hardly possible that any being should get evil from so healthy a book as the "Leaves of Grass," which is simply comical wherever it falls short of nobility; but if there be any such, who cannot both take and leave, who cannot let a single opportunity pass by without some unworthy and unmanly thought, I should have as great difficulty, and neither more nor less, in recommending the works of Whitman as in lending them Shakespeare, or letting them go abroad outside of the grounds of a private asylum.

SO HERE ENDETH "THE ESSAY ON WALT WHITMAN," BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: THE FRONTISPICE BEING A PHOTOGRAVURE OF THE BAS RELIEF BY ST. GEROME-ROYCROFT, THE TITLE PAGE DESIGNED BY LOUIS RHEAD, AND THE WHOLE DONE INTO A BOOK BY THE ROYCROFTERS, AT THE ROYCROFT SHOP, WHICH IS IN EAST AURORA, ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK, U. S. A., IN THE YEAR MCM.



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